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## TEACHING AMERICAN SOLDIERS A LITTLE FRENCH

A paper read before the Modern Language Association at Yale University,  
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Perhaps it was my duty in preparing this little paper to get into touch with all or most of the others who had suddenly been called upon last spring to improvise means and methods of imparting to our soldiers the beginnings of a knowledge of the French language and learn from them what they had accomplished. I have been in communication, unfortunately with only a few of them, but there is little doubt that their experience is typical of that of the others. All were caught unawares and had to get to work hastily upon a problem quite unlike any that had presented itself before. From the director of the Educational Division of the National War Work Council I have learned that no satisfactory solution has yet been offered of this complicated problem, which involves a long series of questions such as the question of finding capable teachers in sufficient numbers, the possibility of having men who are not regular teachers work under the supervision of directors who are, the question of remuneration, the question of classifying the men according to their general intelligence or previous training in language study, the question of the size of the classes, the choice of text books, the proper method to pursue, the question of the vocabulary to be imparted, and I know not how many more questions. I may therefore without impropriety confine myself to a narrative of my own experiences and a statement of my own views and let them stand merely as such.

Last spring through the good offices of a member of the faculty of the College of the City of New York who was also an officer in the National Guard of the State, I organized work in five or six armories in the city and undertook myself a class in the Municipal Building, composed of the men of the Quartermaster's Corps, and on the evening of May 17 last, I went down town to give the first lesson. I had a plan in my mind for this first lesson, but I could not feel sure that it was a good one, nor that I could carry it out, since I had no inkling as to what sort of class I should find.

Major Farrell received me with the greatest courtesy and presented me to a body of some sixty men who stood at attention as I mounted a little platform in front of the blackboard. They were nearly all young men, all but a few in uniform, of various nationalities, to judge by their names and appearance, and of various degrees of education. The first impression was that of a lot of manly, serious fellows, and this impression was never belied during the two months that followed.

I had cast about for a text book that I might use but only two or three had appeared that pretended to have as their aim the instruction of our soldiers, and honesty bids me declare that they were faulty. So I was thrown upon my own resources. Years before I had rejected exclusively Direct Method as unsuitable for any but very young children and could not have made myself ready to employ it upon such short notice even if I believed in it. It was evident that there could be little study between the lessons, the class was exceedingly large and as a consequence little attention could be given to individuals, and the men were not assembled according to any educational standard. Inquiry elicited the information that exactly one had studied French before, that a number had been down to the Mexican border and had studied or picked up some Spanish, but the majority had never studied any foreign language. What sort of first lesson should I give?

Upon the blackboard I wrote a dozen words, military terms all of them and practically the same in spelling in French and English; such words as *général*, *colonel*, *amiral*, *marine*, *armée*, *capitaine*, *arsenal*. In this first group I avoided nasals vowels and the sounds written in French *eu* and *u*. These words I pronounced distinctly and slowly, marking off the syllable division very carefully. The men called out each word after me in chorus and this

was repeated twice or thrice. Then an individual was asked to pronounce the word. The list was gradually expanded to about fifty and words containing the strange sounds were introduced, but were still confined to those the meaning of which was obvious. The names of countries and nationalities were useful here. I indulged in no phonetic theory, beyond showing that each vowel always kept its sound whether stressed or not, and this I demonstrated practically rather than theoretically contrasting *Portugal* with *Le Portugal*, *Italy* with *L'Italie*, *Russia* with *La Russie*, *temperature* with *la température*, *nationality* with *la nationalité*.

When the men called the words out in chorus, as you have all probably observed in similar practice, they all seemed to be pronouncing them correctly. Occasionally it was possible to notice someone was wrong and to detect an error in the mass of sound. But when an individual was called upon to pronounce the word alone, he sometimes failed to utter it with even approximate correctness. This is a curious phenomenon. On this first evening, too, I found certain persons, as teachers of French always do, who were unable to produce the vowels in the words *peu* and *pu* by imitation, but who succeeded in giving these sounds correctly after being told how to place their lips and tongue in the proper position. It is always amusing to observe the look of surprise on their faces when they hear themselves utter a sound that never came from their own mouths before.

Perhaps half an hour was spent upon this phonetic exercise intended to show just what the strange and mysterious sounds of the foreign language were. Then, in order that interest might not lag, I put upon the board the names of the days of the week, the names of the months, the numbers up through ten, perhaps also the seasons, the general divisions of time, the divisions of the day, a few colors, a few parts of the body. These the men copied and recited in chorus and individually. The hour came to a close; I offered to stop or go on according to the desire of the officer in charge and of the men themselves. It was unanimously voted that the lesson should continue, and this vote was very encouraging to the teacher who had been groping his way. So now I proposed that they should learn some common and necessary expressions in daily use and I asked the men themselves to suggest any they would like to know. The first one called

for was, "Where can I get some tobacco?" Another was, "Where is the railway station?" In giving the French equivalents for these questions I was careful to do two things: first, to explain what the individual words really meant, and second, to give the probable answers. The second of these is usually omitted in little handbooks prepared for the traveler in foreign lands, so that, although he may learn parrot-fashion, or even intelligently, to formulate his questions, he is quite helpless when the answer comes to his unprepared mind and ear.

We were well along into a second hour of instruction, and the enthusiasm was such that I thought it would be well to take advantage of it and give the men a feeling of real acquisition; so I put upon the blackboard the words of the first stanza and of the refrain of the Marseillaise, pronounced the words, translated them, sang them line by line, got the men to sing each line in chorus after me and succeeded, to my own genuine surprise and very great pleasure in securing a very good and very rousing rendition of the great national hymn of France—and here ended the first lesson.

It was unfortunate that not more than one hour a week could be given to the work, and there was furthermore no assurance that the men could give any time to study between the lessons. Evidently then no great amount could be learned and I made sure that no one should be under any illusions on that score; I did not wish that any disappointment should later be manifested or felt in any quarter. But I could promise that no time should be wasted, that every minute should be employed usefully, that the little that might be learned should be of immediate and practical value. The results were good and better than I had expected.

As no book was available I sent down in advance each week a lesson which a secretary manifolded during the week and placed in the hands of the men upon my arrival. No English appeared on the paper, but the words and sentences were numbered. The men were requested to put the translations, if they thought they could not recall them, on another paper, opposite the corresponding number, the idea of this device being to get them to test their own memories. In class the methods could be varied only slightly. There was a rapid review of the preceding lesson; a test which consisted in asking individuals to translate words or

sentences from French into English and from English into French. There was an attempt to get them to give replies in French to questions addressed them in French. The new matter was presented as before by work in chorus, supplemented by answers from individuals in turn. By the fourth or fifth lesson I had slipped in the present indicative of *avoir* and *être* and a lot of common verbs in this tense, in the imperative and in the past tense of conversation. By the ninth or tenth lesson the number of short sentences given in one lesson had been enlarged to one hundred and twenty-five. The chief facts concerning the singular and plural of nouns, their gender, the agreement of adjectives, the formation of the negative, the partitive article, were set forth, but very summarily and mainly by drill upon examples.

Sentences were grouped by topics, such as the sights in a street, a railway journey, the dinner table, speaking through a telephone, going to bed, getting up, telling time, shopping.

About the eighth lesson I gave the men a general review of all we had been over and was gratified to discover that most of them had really learned a good deal.

During this period I happened upon the *Vade Mecum* written by Eugène Plumon for the British and French soldiers in the present campaign in France, a wholly admirable work, and from it I copied all the terms given therein that appeared to me to be especially needed by the men in the Quartermaster's Corps. These the men learned, or, at least, recited once.

The lessons ceased with the eleventh. In July these men were scattered to many different points throughout the country. We parted, saying many pleasant things to each other, and with some emotion. The work had not been without profit for me, whatever it had been for them.

The teachers whom I recommended to other groups of soldiers made very divergent reports. In one case, the professor, who is a thoroughly competent and successful native French teacher, full of energy and good sense, found he could excite no interest in the class of raw recruits that fell to his lot and his work did not last long. Another, who taught in a Brooklyn armory, felt he was having great success and the colonel of the regiment wrote me a letter commending him in the warmest terms and expressing great satisfaction in the results obtained.

In June I was requested by Mr. S. Stanwood Menken, President of the National Security League, to get up a little Handbook for American Soldiers. In a few weeks the work was done and the manuscript sent in.

The little book entailed an amount of labor that seems a great deal when its very small size is considered. It is a sort of first aid to French, a sort of tabloid dose. It begins with a very summary description of the pronunciation and a method of indicating it which consists in writing the French words with the letters of the alphabet, giving to each its most usual French sound; the acute and grave accents indicate the close and open sounds, not only of *e*, but of *o* and *eu* also, and the nasal vowels are indicated by a *~* placed over the vowel affected. The book contains no grammatical explanations whatever. The labor involved in compiling it was occasioned by the necessity for rigorous elimination of anything that might be thought superfluous. Actual use has demonstrated that men can learn rapidly what is in it and if they are helped by a teacher they can lay a good foundation for further study. I have used it myself in two classes. One of these was the staff of officers of the 22d Engineers in New York City. They attended a daily lesson for twenty-two days up to the day preceding their departure for Spartanburg. They were a body of picked men; many of them were college graduates; all who were not had had at least a high school education or had been in some technical school. The attendance was fairly regular, a majority never missed a lesson except the last two or three, the progress was very rapid. Each day a portion of the little book was assigned as a lesson and recited on the morrow in various ways during part of the hour. Much of the work was done with books closed. Each day also, after a good start had been made, a short lesson was given at the blackboard on some grammatical point and the men were asked to take notes. During the latter half of the course we read together at sight from a French newspaper. Those portions were selected for reading which offered apparent promise of proving easy and the men were guided in the valuable process of intelligent guessing from the context. As the training of the ear, or to put it better, the acquisition of the power of understanding a foreign language through the ear without the help of the eye is one of the greatest difficulties in learning it, as much

opportunity as possible was given the men to see if they could understand French without glancing at book or paper, and we had besides some of the inevitably artificial, but probably profitable so-called conversation based upon the passages read.

These lessons with these picked men, intelligent, cultured and really eager to learn, interested me exceedingly. They confirmed the convictions of years in regard to the teaching and learning of a foreign language, one of which is that it is in the main an artificial process, and that it is necessarily removed from the so-called natural or unconscious method of acquisition in proportion to the learner's intelligence. A young child learns two languages, and mingles the two in various ways; the uneducated adult picks up a second language in favorable conditions but only after a fashion and he also mingles the two. The intelligent man wishes to understand and he knows when he does not understand. If you try any direct method devices on him and you succeed in getting the meaning of the strange word into his head, he translates mentally, in spite of you, in spite of himself. He does not take easily to the new sounds, but he is helped if they can be explained to him, and he wants explanations all along the line. I believe myself in a comparative method for all intelligent persons above the age of early childhood, and this applies to all the divisions, phonetics, vocabulary, morphology and syntax.

A propos of the phonetics there was a most interesting case among these officers of the 22d Engineers. One of the men attracted my attention from the start because of a peculiar difficulty he experienced in learning to pronounce. He could usually reproduce a short word and very accurately too. His difficulties began if the word or groups of words contained three or more syllables, and were proportionate to the length of the word or sentence. Then I discovered that after he had pronounced a word correctly or fairly well, he was not for that reason able to pronounce without help a word like it. Then I discovered that he had no real conception of the fact that a word is made up of sounds; he appeared to take in a word as a whole without any analysis, and without any power of analysis. To tell him that the letter *i* in French represents the sound it has in the word *machine* and then ask him to pronounce *la mine*, did not help him, it confused him. He seemed unable to isolate mentally any vowel



or consonant from its surroundings. I could not get him to understand what was meant by a stressed syllable. Of course I had little time to give him, but it would have been interesting to have him alone and endeavor to discover a way out of his singular difficulty. The others waited patiently and sympathetically while he floundered about and after a while he ceased to come to class. I learned from one of the other officers that he was an excellent mathematician and grasped explanations in that field much more rapidly than the average man.

Most of these officers had been down at the Mexican border and some had learned a certain amount of Spanish. This was a help in some cases, a handicap in others. Some remembered their Latin, one knew a great deal of Latin, had originally begun to study for the priesthood and he liked to ask questions concerning differences and similarities between Latin and French. They were helped almost invariably by calling attention to similarities and differences between French and English. They pronounced better when they consciously avoided certain tendencies natural to speakers of English. They were interested when I imitated their good American way of saying a French word or sentence, gave the right pronunciation and analyzed the difference. Although they were grown men most of them acquired a good pronunciation; they learned to understand me even when I spoke pretty rapidly, they mastered a vocabulary of several hundred words, they got some notions of the more essential facts of the grammar.

As I said a moment ago, this brief experience confirms me in my views as to the teaching of foreign languages. There is no open sesame. There is no single obviously right method. Mere translation will not do, mere grammar will not do, phonetic transcriptions alone will not teach pronunciation, the exclusively direct method will not make the learned efface from his mind, even for the time being, all knowledge of his mother tongue, nor make him think in a foreign language before he knows a great deal of it.

I have said that the few books that have come under my eye were faulty. It is but just to say that all have merits. Yet some, still, in this year of grace 1917, pretend to give the pronunciation of French by merely spelling the words according to some personal conception of English orthography, as though our chaotic method

of representing English sounds could convey to our mind a French sound. So *zher ver* is written down to represent *jeveux!* and *mangs* can you guess it? *mangs* is for *mince!* Some of the books will repel our soldiers, I fear, by a scientific phonetic notation, for it does look forbidding. One of them has been devised according to the Gouin method, but, as is almost unavoidable in constructing a book by this method, it is full of manufactured phraseology, obviously thought out first in English, and the sentences are not such as are really used and are now and then not really usable. Another in the very first lesson gives careful but lengthy explanations of grammatical facts, which, I feel sure, will repel and not attract this type of learner.

The title of this little paper is "Teaching French to American Soldiers". I must ask indulgence for having uttered so many commonplaces concerning the teaching of French. Let me conclude with a few words concerning the American soldiers.

Many of these I have seen day after day for months. Not only have I taught them; I have broken bread with them in the armory, received them in my home and at my table. If the mass of the men in our army measure up in any degree to those it has been my privilege to know, our nation may be confident of the future. For me it has been as a tonic to come into contact with these fine types of American manhood. The relations between officers and men in the 22d Engineers were eminently human. I am a layman in military matters surely, but the ideal of discipline I saw realized among those men was to my mind a superb ideal: cheerful, confident, friendly obedience on the one hand; definite, competent, firm, but kindly command on the other; a fine spirit of comradeship everywhere, and a fervid patriotism that did one's heart good. These officers are able men, they are men of cultivated minds and fine technical knowledge. They know this war is a man's job, they are red-blooded men and they will do their job.

It is my privilege to know also a number of French officers, the flower of their race, in many respects the flower of the human race. If we teachers of French help to bring the two types into real mental contact we shall have rendered them and our two great countries no small service.

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